

Illegal Immigrants Indicted In New Mexico Drivers License Scheme

SANTA FE – Four illegal foreign nationals, including the ring leader who is accused of charging \$6,000 per individual to fraudulently obtain a New Mexico driver's license, have been indicted on felony criminal charges. This is the sixth incident in the last seven months involving criminal operators bringing out-of-state illegal immigrants to New Mexico for the sole purpose of obtaining a license.

A Santa Fe grand jury last week returned indictments against ring leader Siraj A. "Sunny" Poonawala, 55. The same grand jury a week before also indicted his clients Sanjaykumar G. Patel, 24; Bhaveshkumar M. Prajapati, 27; and Hiteshkumar A. Patel, 24; on charges of conspiracy and altered, forged or fictitious license. If convicted, they could face a maximum of three years in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000.

"We just cannot ignore this problem any longer as more and more illegal immigrants continue to flood New Mexico to obtain a driver's license," said Governor Susana Martinez. "I urge the Senate to do the right thing and pass the bill that stops issuing drivers' licenses to illegal immigrants. New Mexicans are demanding this action and it's time to act in the interest of public safety and national security."

"Our investigations primarily focus on issues relating to tax fraud and tax compliance. If this issue is not addressed, the strain on our investigative resources could be overwhelmed," said Taxation & Revenue Secretary Demesia Padilla.

Poonawala was released for medical reasons after his arrest on federal immigration charges in Albuquerque on Feb. 16. He was rearrested at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport while boarding a plane to India on Feb. 22. The four suspects, along with a fifth offender, were arrested Feb. 16 at the Amtrak Station in Albuquerque.

The arrests follow an intensive, ongoing investigation which was being conducted jointly by the Tax Fraud Investigations Division of the New Mexico Taxation and Revenue Department, the Investigations Bureau of the New Mexico State Police, and the United States Border Patrol.

According to the investigation conducted by the New Mexico Taxation & Revenue Department's Tax Fraud Investigations Division, Poonawala made 26 appointments for drivers' licenses for foreign nationals between Sept. 17, 2010 and Jan. 21, 2011 with appointment dates from Oct. 25, 2010 through April 20, 2011.

Poonawala is accused of taking his customers to an apartment complex in Albuquerque where he would temporarily lease an apartment in their names. He also would buy insurance in their names from a local insurance agent. The lease agreement and the insurance policy were then used as the two required residency documents when the individuals applied for their driver's licenses.

The following cases were also investigated jointly by the Tax Fraud Investigations Division, New Mexico State Police and Immigrations and Customs Enforcement over the last seven months:

- In November 2010, three Chinese nationals - Shu Sheng Lui, 33, Hiew Fongyee, 31, and Lam Fong Siu, 44 - were arrested in Albuquerque after they attempted to acquire licenses with forged residency documents. They had paid 22-year-old Gordon Leong \$500 per person to obtain forged documents showing New Mexico residence in order to obtain driver's licenses.
- In October 2010, State Police arrested two Chinese nationals accused of being part of an illegal driver's license

scheme at an MVD office in Santa Fe. Shunxian Feng, 33, flew in from China for the sole purpose of getting a driver's license. Workers at MVD became suspicious after seeing Feng with Shu Juan Liu, whom workers had noticed at MVD several times. Shu Juan Liu fled, but Feng and Yue Xian Liu, 50, were arrested and charged with conspiracy and forging a fictitious license.

- In September 2010, State Police arrested Costa Rican national Adolfo J. Mora-Granados, 23, in Albuquerque for his suspected role in helping four illegal immigrants obtain driver's licenses. He is accused of using fake lease agreements to secure licenses. He was charged with four counts of conspiracy and six counts of forgery.
- In September 2010, State Police arrested Christian Sobral, a Brazilian man who tried to obtain licenses for two other Brazilians in Albuquerque. Sobral was paid \$3,000 to fly them into New Mexico. He was charged with two counts of conspiracy to commit a felony.
- In July 2010, a 32-year-old Illinois man was arrested after helping two undocumented Polish immigrants who live in Illinois get licenses in Albuquerque. Jaroslaw Kowalczyk, who pleaded guilty in federal court for transporting illegal immigrants, charged the immigrants \$1,000 each to drive them to New Mexico to obtain forged residency documents.